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AND FORT POLK
PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE
Press Release
7073 RADIO ROAD
FORT POLK LA 71459-5342
Voice: (337) 531-4630
Fax: (337) 531-6014**



Release Number: 0507IFP
FOR MORE INFORMATION
Contact: Samantha Evans (337) 531-4630

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The Individual and the Team: The Case of George Patton

by
Brig. Gen. Daniel P. Bolger

FORT POLK, La. - Even in today's era of computer-generated imagery and edgy quick-cut filmmaking, many Americans still spend time watching older movies. As the years go by, the real turkeys and flops drift into well-deserved obscurity, but the good ones endure. For Soldiers and all interested in military history, as well as for those who like well-crafted motion pictures, the 1970 movie Patton holds up very well indeed as a classic biographic study of one of our country's most effective and controversial generals. The film won many Academy Awards, including "Best Picture" and "Best Actor." The screenplay was also recognized, and it reflected the writing of a young Francis Ford Coppola, soon to gain fame with his Godfather series.

The movie opens focused on the impressive figure of actor George C. Scott in full dress uniform as General George S. Patton, Jr. Striding purposefully before a huge American flag, Scott launches into a passionate speech directed right at us, the audience. The real Patton gave many such addresses to his Soldiers, and the movie portrays a very typical version.

Along with several memorable curses and turns of phrase, the Patton character offers this thought: "The Army is a team. It lives, eats, sleeps, and fights as a team. All this stuff you've been hearing about individuality is a lot of crap." That came directly from the real Patton's public statements, and as he trained Soldiers for both World War I and World War II, he consistently emphasized teamwork. Patton's units always were strong teams, epitomized by his superb Third Army of 1944-45, which liberated much of western Europe from the Nazi Germans.

And yet, words aside, the rest of the movie offers the story of a general who was not exactly a team player. In fact, Patton is depicted quite accurately as a gifted but difficult leader, extraordinarily capable in battle, but in the words of his comrade General Omar Bradley, “a pain in the neck.” High-strung, emotional, a man who prayed on his knees daily and yet used swear words liberally, Patton was clearly very much an individual. He mouthed off to the press, insulted allied leaders, and foolishly slapped enlisted Soldiers. Despite his education at West Point and over three decades in the service, his strong, unique personality always bubbled up. Some of the local folks around Leesville, who met the real Patton in September of 1941 during pre-war maneuvers, will tell you that he was quite a character. His Soldiers respected him and knew him as a winner, admittedly a tough and demanding one. The Nazi German officers who faced him, though, understood that this fire and imagination, this restless energy, made Patton the American general they feared most.

Patton, in both the wonderful movie and the historical record, offers us a great reminder that when we put on a uniform, we accept a dynamic dialectic, a struggle between the individual and the Army. We subordinate our self to the good of the whole, to the values of the organization, and to the goals of the greater force. But the Army very much needs our individual skills, vision, and talents. The trick is getting the right balance. In Patton’s case, we got enough of his renegade side to cause discomfort among his more traditional superiors, but we got the right amount of genius to help us win our greatest war.

The easy thing for any military leader is to insist on simple, cookie-cutter conformity. In uniform standards for parade or haircut regulations, there’s nothing wrong with that. It is not enough, of course. Much tougher, and better, is for leaders to know their subordinates so well that they understand their strengths and weaknesses, their talents and foibles. It’s up to all of us to channel that energy and insight where it most helps our Army team.

Patton’s superiors, like Bradley and Dwight Eisenhower, did so in World War II. We know the results. It is up to us to do the same. Every man and women in our ranks has something unique to offer. Know who is on your team, help them when they stumble, and let them contribute fully. As Patton showed us, that’s a sure path to victory.